

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

MISS KATHERINE CORNELL has been in town in a new play. In fact, Mr. John Barrymore has been in town in a new play; and also Walter Houston has appeared in his recent Manhattan success, "Knickerbocker Holiday", and Mr. and Mrs. Lunt have brought a couple productions to the city. And they were good, all good, Barrymore excepted; still the chief concern of theatrical-going Columbus rests with the Cornell production.

Miss Cornell is always an attraction, and this time when she visited Columbus, she brought a brand new vehicle written by Samuel N. Behrman, directed by her husband, Guthrie McClintic, with settings designed by Joe Mielziner, and with no less a personage seated in the fourth row center than Mr. Alexander Woollcott. Despite the fact that lines were being re-written and

changed, and that the lighting at the Hartman theatre was extremely poor, and that the play was barely a week old, despite all of these items, it was a gala occasion. For there, right before us, we had the first lady of the theatre plus a foremost director and a first rate critic. And Columbus did not falter; Columbus responded dutifully.

Mr. Behrman's play is called "No Time for Comedy", a title which belies itself; for the lines themselves, in their brilliancy and their brittleness, will help to keep the play alive. Of course Miss Cornell will do that very thing too, and so will her leading man, Mr. Laurence Olivier. But without such careful directing and without such splendid acting, the play itself might not last so long a time after it reaches Broadway.

The story of "No Time for Comedy" is rather trite.

It concerns the actress-wife of a playwright who has always written his comedies for his famous wife; but because of the uncertain condition in Europe, the author-husband can think of no theme dealing with comedy. Of course he is tutored in his idea by another woman—the presence of another woman in the story is somewhat inevitable—and she feels that her lot in life is to furnish the inspiration to great and near great artists and men of letters. Yes, you guessed the end of the play: playwright-husband returns to actress-wife with only a few of the corners bruised and in only a slightly shop-worn condition. Does he get his inspiration for a comedy? Oh, most certainly yes, for this play is a comedy, and Mr. Behrman is crafty enough to see on which side his bread is buttered.

As you can see, the plot is slight, but with Mr. Behrman's crisp lines and Miss Cornell's superb acting it will last for many weeks on Broadway where it opened on Monday, April 17. I would not be a bit surprised to learn that Mr. Woollcott was in the city to help brush off the rough places. For example, in the third act, there are some extremely beautiful lines regarding the "necessity" of going to Spain to fight in the brutal conflict; lines, I feel sure, that never came from Mr. Behrman's pen, but lines that are so Woollcottian in their very structure that nobody could have written them but the author of "While Rome Burns."

"No Time for Comedy" furnished, I thought, one of the most enjoyable evenings I have spent in the theatre for several years. Long live Miss Katherine Cornell!

Mention of Mr. Behrman's play recalls to mind the very fact that he is a member, one of five, of the new Broadway corporation called The Playwrights' Company. This Company was formed last summer by five of the leading American playwrights. It was formed because these five men "shared several strong and positive ambitions for the theatre", and because they "wanted to quit hoboing from one office to another and build up permanent personal and business relationships within an organization of our own." I am quoting from an article written by one of the members of the company, Mr. Maxwell Anderson, appearing in the December 1938 issue of *Stage*. Other members of the Company besides Mr. Behrman and Mr. Anderson, are Mr. Elmer Rice, Mr. Sidney Howard, and Mr. Robert E. Sherwood. Let us see what these men have produced in the American theatre since they banded together last September.

Mr. Howard, to date, has not produced, and I have seen no announcements regarding his intentions. It merely has been stated that he is living in Massachusetts where he is working on a play. But with his past successes in mind it can be expected that he will write a provocative piece. Mr. Howard, you remember, is the author of "The Silver Cord", that moving story of mother-love, sometimes called "smother-love." Mr. Howard is also the author of "Yellow Jack" which made a splendid cinema last summer. Then, it must not be

forgotten, that in 1924 he won the Pulitzer award with his "They Knew What They Wanted." With anxious gestures we are awaiting Mr. Howard's contribution to The Playwrights' Company.

As a dramatist Mr. Behrman leaped to fame in 1932 when he wrote "Biography", still thought by some critics to be the best of his works. Several years later followed his "Rain From Heaven", and in 1936 his "End of Summer." "End of Summer" is a talky play with the characters skimming the edges of desire but never falling completely into the abyss. Miss Ina Claire in the leading role did a brilliant piece of acting in it. Mr. Behrman also has chalked up to his credit the American revision of the French Giraudoux play, "Amphitryon 38" which Mr. and Mrs. Lunt have had on tour this past season. On first and second considerations, however, I am inclined to think that "No Time for Comedy" is better than "Biography".

Robert E. Sherwood, I suppose, has been the most successful of the five members with his production of "Abe Lincoln in Illinois". It is a play dealing with the Springfield years of Mr. Lincoln's life, the years preceding his sojourn to Washington as President. It has been an outstanding success of the present season in New York, and recently the script was sold to Hollywood for the neat sum of \$275,000, of which, it is reported \$110,000 goes to The Playwrights' Company. One of Mr. Sherwood's early plays was "The Road to Rome", an interesting but trite play about Hannibal and a certain Roman matron, and their reasons why he never did capture Rome although he reached the very walls of the city. More recently, however, Mr. Sherwood's name was associated with "Idiot's Delight", a play with an anti-war accent in which Mr. and Mrs. Lunt did such brilliant work several seasons ago.

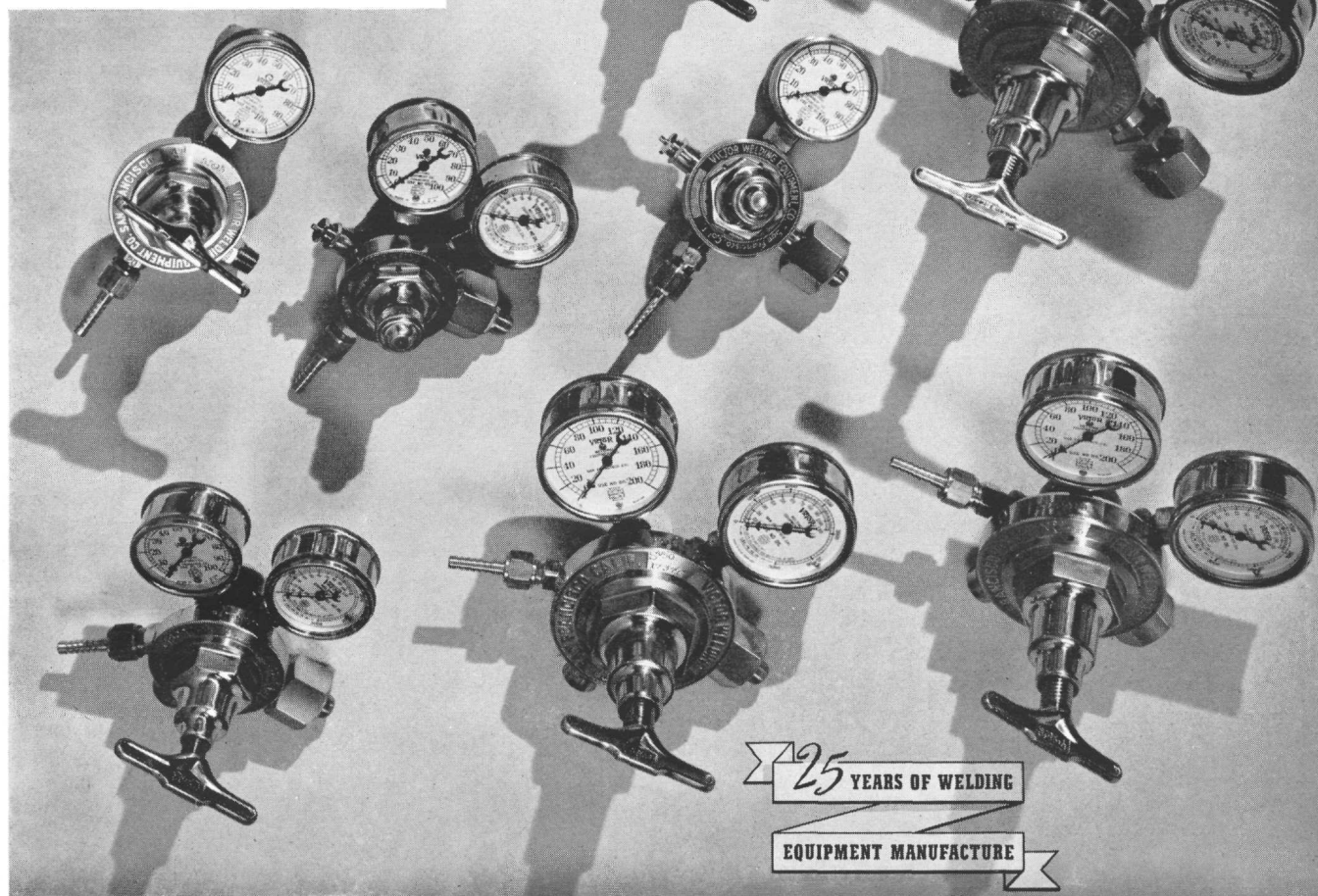
Mr. Elmer Rice as a member of the Company has been registered as the first to produce a failure. He called it "American Landscape", and it lasted for a short run of several weeks when it was closed and its props taken to a theatrical warehouse. Too bad, indeed, that Mr. Rice should have experienced such ill luck; he is remembered for his "Street Scene", still the best of a long list of "city plays" produced in 1926 in the same manner.

Last, but not least, comes Mr. Maxwell Anderson with his production of "Knickerbocker Holiday". It has not been too, too successful, opening as it did in New York in November and closing the first of February. Surely it was not as successful as his "What Price Glory" in 1924, or his "Elizabeth the Queen" in 1930, or his "Winterset" in 1935.

But individual success or failure to the contrary, more power to The Playwrights' Company! Those five men are striving to give the revived American theatre better plays; they will be successful; they cannot lose.

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